

**Chairman Tom Davis
Opening Statement
Government Reform Committee Hearing
“The Impact of Visa Processing Delays on the
Arts, Education and American Innovation”
Tuesday, April 4, 2006
10:00 a.m.
Room 2154 Rayburn House Office Building**

Good morning and welcome to today’s hearing on the challenges facing the State Department in balancing security and efficiency in the visa process. The purpose of this hearing is to highlight the Department’s efforts to cope with ever-increasing visa application volume in the post-9/11 security environment. We also will examine the impact of this process on American economic and cultural vitality, and explore ways Congress can ensure the U.S. remains open and accessible.

Following the 9/11 attacks, we came to understand that our borders begin overseas at our consulates and that the process of granting a visa to foreign citizens seeking to travel here is the first line of defense in protecting the homeland from terrorist attack. Each of the 9/11 terrorists had at some point been vetted through a U.S. consulate and received a visa. Consequently, the Government has gone to great lengths to secure the visa process.

Congress mandated that nearly every applicant for a visa be interviewed, the State Department began collecting biometrics on all applicants, and many new consular employees were hired. This state of affairs, however, has placed tremendous strains on the visa process. Currently, some applicants for visas to the United States can face daunting waits just to get an interview, while others face merely seasonal spikes in wait

times or little wait at all. Indians, in particular, face interview wait times ranging from 100 to 160 days; this is simply unacceptable.

In our increasingly interconnected world, ease of movement across national borders – of people and of capital – is inextricably tied to economic prosperity. A quest for perfect security is a fool’s errand. Instead, we need to find ways to maximize security while simultaneously preserving the vibrant and open character of American society. In other words, what risks are we prepared to accept, and what burdens are we prepared to impose, on legitimate travel to the U.S.? As the President signaled in his State of the Union address this year, the competitiveness of the American economy is a central concern for this Government, and an efficient visa process is a vital component of that agenda.

American businesses need to be able to bring foreign partners and customers here on short notice; American universities need to continue attracting top-level foreign students, many of whom will choose to stay in the U.S. and bolster our economy; and the American cultural scene will continue to remain vibrant only as long as foreign artists are able to bring their work to American stages and galleries. Trade shows and arts presenters in particular represent a significant segment of the U.S. economy, comprised largely of small businesses that don’t always have the resources to cope with the significant additional expense of an inefficient visa process. When these important sectors of our economy are unable to do business in the U.S., our collective quality of life suffers.

One of our jobs in Congress is to make sure the Executive Branch has the tools it needs to do its job as efficiently and effectively as possible. At today's hearing I want to hear from our witnesses about ways that Congress can assist the State Department in streamlining the visa process, as well as creative suggestions for improvements to the process itself. For example, do we need to continue interviewing almost every applicant for visas once their biometrics are stored in Government databases? Also, how can we make it easier for State to hire the employees it needs to maximize consular efficiency? These are just some of the questions the Committee is interested in addressing today.

We have two distinguished panels of witnesses today, including international music maestro, Yo-Yo Ma, who has taken time out of his busy tour schedule to join us this morning. Again, I want to welcome all of our witnesses to today's hearing.